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Threat Perception and Social Distance towards Foreign Workers in Croatia: A 2019–2024 Shift in the Attitudes of Law Students

Abstract

Recent migration trends in Croatia feature positive net migration alongside a deepening negative perception of foreigners. This paper aims to examine law students' attitudes towards foreign workers over a five-year period, their key determinants, and their associations with social distance towards foreign workers. Survey conducted in 2019 on the attitudes of students at four law faculties in Croatia towards different categories of migrants was repeated in 2024. The results indicate a stronger perception of foreign workers in Croatia as a cultural and symbolic threat than as a real economic threat; however, at the latent level, these attitudes are combined into a single integrated economic–cultural dimension. These attitudes were confirmed as the strongest predictors of social distance towards foreign workers, which also increased significantly during the analysed period – from average acceptance of foreign workers as next-door neighbours in 2019 to average acceptance as workplace colleagues workplace in 2024. Regression analysis also confirmed a significant effect of political attitudes on social distance.

Keywords

foreign (migrant) workers, attitude change, threat perception, social distance, law students, Croatia

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Croatia has experienced significant changes in its migration context. In addition to the gradual decline in emigration from Croatia in recent years, net migration has become positive, with increasing numbers of third-country nationals being registered, especially from certain Asian countries. Since 2019, when the first survey on law students' attitudes towards immigrants in Croatia was conducted (Mrakovčić & Gregurović 2020; Gregurović & Mrakovčić 2022), the number of immigrants from Nepal, India, and the Philippines arriving in Croatia primarily for employment purposes has steadily increased. At the same time, alongside the increase in the number of foreigners, a noticeable shift in the attitudes of the local population towards immigrants has occurred. As previous research studies report, the size of the immigrant group affects and reinforces anti-immigrant sentiment, as the majority population may perceive larger groups of newcomers as more threatening (Quillian 1995; Semyonov et al. 2006; Hooghe & de Vroome 2015). This reflects the assumptions of ethnic competition theory, according to which the local population competes with newcomers for scarce resources (e.g., employment), thereby developing stronger negative attitudes towards immigrants (Semyonov et al. 2006; Pardos-Prado 2011). A growing body of quantitative research in the Croatian context, using both representative and convenience samples, has examined various categories of migrants (labour and forced migrants) as subjects of public attitudes. Labour migrants, both directly and indirectly, have been the focus of several studies. A sociological study on attitudes towards foreign workers in Croatia revealed that adult Croatian citizens exhibited considerable opposition towards them and perceived foreigners as a socio-economic and socio-cultural threat, while maintaining a high level of social distance (Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2012). Research by Gregurović et al. (2016), conducted on a sample of adults from Vukovar-Srijem and Osijek-Baranja counties, showed that citizens perceived migrant workers primarily as a cultural threat and expressed a significant degree of social distance, while asylum seekers were perceived as a security and economic threat. Research by Matić et al. (2019), conducted on a national sample of young people, found moderate levels of anti-immigrant prejudice linked to respondents' personality traits and ideological predispositions. The Centre for Peace Studies analysed the attitudes of the general population towards various categories of immigrants across three survey cycles, with the latest cycle from 2024 recording a negative shift in attitudes compared to the

results obtained in 2013 and 2017 (CMS 2013; CMS 2017). These findings indicated increased fear and prejudice towards immigration across virtually all dimensions (Župarić-Iljić & Lalić 2024). International studies including Croatia have likewise documented increasingly negative attitudes towards immigration and its perceived effects among Croatian citizens, primarily in the dimension of cultural threat (Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2024). Finally, recently published results from a survey experiment conducted among economics and business students showed that respondents reacted positively to economic incentives (scarcity in the labour market) whereas compassion and the experience of emigration among fellow citizens had no statistically significant effect on their responses. The authors point to the positive effects that certain information nudges may have on changing attitudes towards migrants (Ivandić et al. 2026). The context in which these changes unfold is also shaped by media and public discourse, with certain political and social figures increasingly portraying migrants and their perceived differences as both realistic and symbolic threats to Croatian society in their public statements and debates.

Building on these developments, our study was replicated in 2024 with a new cohort of law students in Croatia to assess the current state of attitudes towards foreign workers,¹ expressed through the perception of integrated (economic and cultural) threat, and changes in these attitudes over time. In addition, the analysis focuses on the key determinants of these attitudes and their association with social distance towards foreign workers. Social distance is used as an indicator of potential behavioural intentions and of the level of understanding and intimacy characterising social relations between members of different groups in different social situations (Park 1924; Bogardus 1925).

Law students were selected because, as future professionals, they are likely to interact with the groups under study and may play a key role in enforcing migrants' rights in Croatia. It is therefore important to assess whether they view immigration and immigrants' rights mainly through the lens of national and international legal norms or whether their perceptions align more closely with those of legal laypersons shaped by public and media discourse (cf. Gregurović & Mrakovčić 2022).

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Research on attitudes towards distinct categories of immigrants is a well-established multidisciplinary field in North America, Western Europe,

and Australia, and has also emerged more recently in the Croatian context. At the same time, there is a partial overlap in the structures and dimensions used to measure attitudes towards regular (labour) migrants, foreigners in general, and forced migrants – namely asylum seekers and refugees. Different categories of immigrants may be perceived as posing social, political, security, health, and even demographic threats. However, several recurring themes characterise research in this field, most notably perceptions of the symbolic and/or realistic threat posed by foreigners. Such perceptions primarily concern the economic stability and cultural identity of the local population in countries of transit or final destination (Pereira et al. 2009), and existing studies therefore tend to focus on testing socio-economic and cultural hypotheses about attitudes (cf. Gregurović et al. 2016). The socio-economic hypothesis is grounded in perceptions of symbolic, realistic, or integrated threats that newcomers pose to the economic stability of the host population, whereas the cultural hypothesis rests on perceptions of socio-cultural threats attributed to immigrants through allegedly conflicting values (Ervasti 2004; Schneider 2008).

The basic premise of group threat theory is that a dominant (ethnic) group expresses negative attitudes and prejudice towards another group when it perceives that it may lose its social, economic, or political power (Berg 2009; Rustenbach 2010). In empirical research on attitudes towards immigrants, considerable emphasis is placed on group interests and identity, which constitute the primary basis for attitudes and feelings of hostility towards immigrants. These are manifested as perceptions of threat rooted either in objective social and economic conditions or in cultural and psychological predispositions (Sides & Citrin 2007). In other words, realistic threats are those that endanger the physical and material well-being, as well as the economic and political power, of members of one's own group, whereas symbolic threats primarily refer to differences in values and norms as perceived by members of one's own group in relation to members of other groups (cf. Mrakovčić & Gregurović 2020). According to the Integrated Threat Theory developed by Stephan et al. (1999), regardless of whether threats are symbolic or realistic, they are often examined together as sources of perceived threat and may, in turn, contribute to discriminatory attitudes towards immigrants (see Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović 2013).

Attitudes towards immigrants are shaped by multiple factors (cf. Gregurović 2023). However, research suggests that socio-psychological factors at the individual level are stronger predictors than economic and demographic indicators at the country level (Sides & Citrin 2007).

Moreover, attitudes are affected more strongly by deeply rooted symbolic views of one's own nation and identity, as well as by perceptions of immigrants' cultural characteristics and value systems, than by economic status, material interests, or competition in the labour market (Hainmueller & Hiscox 2007; Sides & Citrin 2007).

Moreover, an increasing number of meta-analyses examining attitudes towards different categories of immigrants confirm the effects of certain socio-demographic characteristics of respondents on these attitudes (Anderson & Ferguson 2017; Cowling et al. 2019). Among the most consistently replicated findings is that male respondents, older individuals, those with lower levels of education, those with more conservative political orientations, more religious respondents, and those with stronger national identification are more likely to hold negative attitudes towards specific categories of migrants (Chandler & Tsai 2001; Rustenbach 2010; McKay et al. 2012; Anderson & Ferguson 2017). In contrast, more educated respondents are significantly less prone to prejudice, place greater value on cultural diversity, and are more likely to believe that immigrants have a positive impact on the host country's economy (Hainmueller & Hiscox 2007). Although research often identifies significant associations between socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes, these associations are frequently weak or only moderate (see Gregurović 2021). At the same time, ideological variables, most notably right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, are considerably stronger predictors. Attitudes towards migrants are also associated with political orientation and, more generally, with an interest in political issues (see Gregurović 2023).

In addition to analysing attitudes towards immigrants and their key determinants, this paper also considers expressed social distance, which some studies relate to attitudes as predictors of potential behaviour measured through various forms of social closeness or distance (see Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2012; Ajduković et al. 2019). Social distance is understood here as the degree of (un)willingness of an individual to establish close social relationships with members of an external group of different ethnic origin and/or social or cultural background, and is treated as one of the fundamental aspects of sociability (Simmel 2001).² The paper also examines the effects of attitudes and other students' characteristics on the degree of expressed social distance towards migrants in Croatia.

3. Immigration to Croatia

During the period covered by the two research cycles (2019–2024), Croatia recorded significant changes in immigrant arrivals, particularly with regard to labour migration. Data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (Table 1) show a steady increase in the number of immigrants over the past decade, although the period of the COVID-19 pandemic was marked by a relative decline or stagnation. Since 2022, immigration has been particularly pronounced, with the number of immigrants exceeding the number of emigrants from Croatia, as reflected in a positive migration balance and its continuous growth. During the same period, official statistics show a reduced share of Croatian citizens among immigrants arriving or returning from abroad, while citizens of other countries began arriving in Croatia in significant numbers. For example, in 2023, an increase was recorded among citizens of non-EU European countries, which can be attributed to the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, in 2024, a significant increase in immigrants from Asian countries was recorded, with their share of the total number of immigrants reaching 40% (CBS 2025).

Table 1: Number of immigrants and emigrants in Croatia, 2019–2024

Year	Immigrants	Emigrants	Net migration
2019	37,726	40,148	-2,422
2020	33,414	34,046	-632
2021	35,912	40,424	-4,512
2022	57,972	46,287	11,685
2023	69,396	39,218	30,178
2024	70,391	38,997	31,394

Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS), Migration of Population of the Republic of Croatia, 2020–2025 (CBS 2025). Prepared by the authors.

Data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics are consistent with data from the Ministry of the Interior on the number of residence and work permits issued, which, over the period under analysis, have increasingly been granted to nationals of Asian countries, most notably citizens of Nepal, India, the Philippines, and Bangladesh (Table 2). Although legal status in Croatia may be regulated on various grounds (employment, family reunification, education, etc.), Eurostat data show that in 2023 Croatia had the highest share of immigrants arriving for employment purposes in the EU (over 90%), whereas in most other EU countries

work-related immigration accounted for less than half of the permits issued to foreign nationals (World Bank 2025).

Table 2: Number of residence and work permits by country of citizenship, 2019–2024

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Citizenship*	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Albania	3,055	3,216	3,720	4,256	4,244	3,951
Bangladesh	145	718	2,093	4,381	8,749	13,630
Bosnia and Herzegovina	31,028	27,603	30,721	36,769	38,247	38,100
China	985	966	1110	372	488	725
Egypt	24	22	116	1,158	4,243	6,672
Philippines	698	1,144	1,897	5,935	10,999	14,680
India	1,092	1,283	2,534	7,690	15,627	20,502
Kosovo	8,337	8,542	7,913	8,979	9,922	8,139
Nepal	902	1,677	4,724	12,222	23,493	35,635
North Macedonia	6,022	4,152	5,926	10,053	13,415	13,855
Serbia	14,337	11,659	13,579	19,127	24,087	27,988
Turkey	299	522	1,277	3,653	5,067	3,959
Ukraine	3,023	2,781	2,992	1,944	1,496	1,830
Uzbekistan	87	182	444	1,797	4,232	6,959
Top 10 citizenships (Total)	69,479	63,023	76,099	113,065	153,850	186,160
TOTAL	72,523	66,655	81,995	124,121	172,499	206,529

Source: Ministarstvo unutranjih poslova Republike Hrvatske n.d.a. Prepared by the authors.

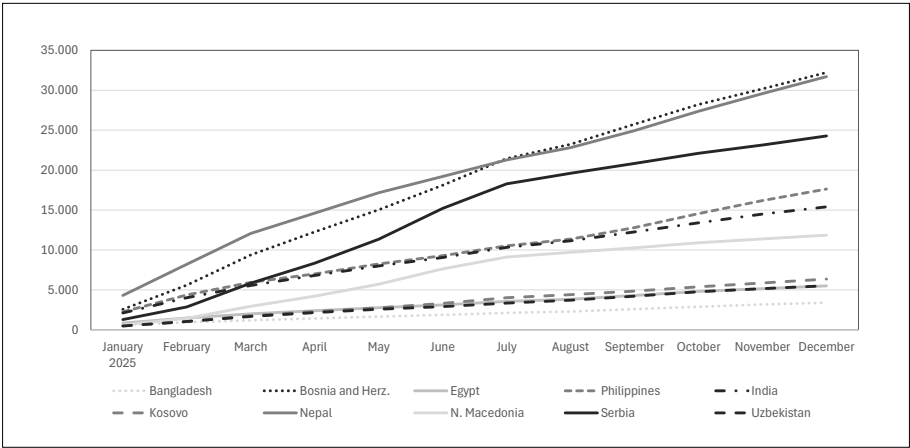
*For each year, the table includes the ten countries of citizenship with the highest number of permits issued (highlighted in grey), as well as countries represented in other years if residence and work permits were issued to their citizens in Croatia.

Statistics further show that in 2024, the largest number of residence and work permits was issued in the construction sector (36%), followed by tourism and hospitality (27%), industry (14%), transport and communications (8%), and trade (4%). Almost two-thirds of permits were issued for new employment, slightly more than one quarter for permit extensions, and 8% for seasonal employment. Data from the Croatian Employment Service show that the most sought-after occupations are construction labourers and cleaners (HZZ n.d.).

Although data for 2025 on issued work and residence permits presented in Figure 1 have not yet been relevant for the timeframe of the second round of survey (conducted in 2024), they remain important for

broader contextualisation and provide evidence of a continued increase in the number of immigrants from Asian countries, which may be perceived as an indicator of a potential source of threat (cf. Quillian 1995; Semyonov et al. 2006; Hooghe & de Vroome 2015). In the first half of 2025 (up to July), the highest number of work permits was issued to Nepalese nationals (Figure 1), while in the second half of the year this number was somewhat surpassed by the number of permits issued to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Figure 1: Number of residence and work permits by country of citizenship in 2025



Source: Ministarstvo unutranjih poslova Republike Hrvatske n.d.a. Prepared by the authors.

It is important to note that the number of residence and work permits issued is not equivalent to the number of foreign workers in Croatia, since the same worker may have been issued more than one residence and work permit if they changed jobs or employers within the reference year. The number of foreign workers can be approximated using data from the Croatian Pension Insurance Institute on the number of persons registered in the pension system. At the end of October 2025, 128,324 insured persons from third countries and 11,410 from the European Economic Area and Switzerland were registered (Jurasić 2025), while according to data from the Ministry of the Interior, a total of 149,166 residence and work permits had been issued during the same period to third-country nationals (Ministarstvo unutranjih poslova Republike Hrvatske n.d.b).

Data on the citizenship of immigrant workers point to potential challenges in status regulation and to the integration difficulties faced by

immigrants from more culturally diverse backgrounds. Additionally, immigrants who differ more substantially from the host population may be perceived differently within local communities, among the general population, and among specific segments thereof, such as the student population analysed in this paper.

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4. Research Aim and Questions

In the context of the increased arrival of economic migrants/foreign workers from culturally more distinct countries to Croatia, this paper aims to assess the current state of attitudes towards foreign workers, expressed through the perception of integrated (economic and cultural) threat, as well as to analyse the key determinants of these perceptions and their changes over time. The focus of the paper is the association between threat perceptions and social distance as an indicator of potential behavioural intentions and of the level of understanding and intimacy characterising social relations between members of different groups in different social situations.

The specific research questions on which the analyses are based are:

1. What are the perceptions of foreign workers as an economic and cultural threat among Croatian law students in 2024?
2. What are the main determinants of the identified threat perceptions among Croatian law students in 2024?
3. Do the perceptions of law students in 2024 differ from those of students surveyed in 2019?
4. How strong is the effect of threat perception on expressed social distance towards foreign workers while controlling for respondents' demographic characteristics and accounting for students' political attitudes?

5. Methodology

5.1. Respondents

The paper draws on survey research conducted in mid-2019 and late 2024 among law students at four law faculties in Croatia (Zagreb, Rijeka, Split and Osijek).³ In both cases, a group-administered questionnaire was conducted during classes with first- and fourth-year students. The 2019 sample comprised 667 respondents, while the 2024 sample comprised 590 respondents. Table 3 presents the basic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 3: Sample structure

		2019		2024	
Variable	Categories	N	%	N	%
Location of the Law Faculty	Zagreb	265	39.4	142	24.1
	Rijeka	193	28.7	172	29.2
	Split	119	17.7	149	25.3
	Osijek	95	14.1	127	21.5
Year of study	1st	352	52.4	383	64.9
	4th	320	47.6	207	35.1
Gender	Female	494	73.5	422	71.5
	Male	173	25.7	153	25.9

Source: Prepared by the authors.

In 2019, the largest proportion of students came from Zagreb (almost 40%), slightly more than one quarter were from Rijeka, slightly less than one fifth were from Split (18%), and 14% were from Osijek. In 2024, the distribution of respondents across the four faculties was somewhat more even. One quarter were from Zagreb and one quarter from Split, slightly more than one fifth were from Osijek, and 29.1% were from Rijeka. While in 2019 the number of first- and fourth-year students in the sample was almost equal, in 2024 the number of first-year students was almost twice as high as the number of fourth-year students. The somewhat more pronounced difference between the samples in terms of year of study did not yield significant differences in the analyses conducted, as year of study showed no statistically significant association with attitudes in either wave of the study (as presented in Table 6 in the Results section).

In both samples, the gender distribution was significantly imbalanced in favour of female students, who accounted for almost three quarters of respondents in each case. The sample was also ethnically very homogeneous in both survey rounds (93.2% Croats in 2019 and 89.8% in 2024).⁴ Finally, at both time points, almost half of the respondents (48.7% in 2019 and 44.7% in 2024) assessed their family's financial situation as neither better nor worse than that of the majority, although respondents on average assessed their family's financial situation as slightly better than that of most others (2019: $M=3.54$, $SD=0.692$; 2024: $M=3.58$, $SD=0.702$).⁵

5.2. Measuring Instruments and Analyses

The dependent construct, attitudes towards foreign workers, was examined using a combined economic–cultural threat scale used in the study by Čačić-Kumpes et al. (2012), who translated, adapted to the Croatian context, and validated the scale originally employed by Watts (1996) in the German context. The scale consists of seven statements and was used to identify attitudes towards the potential entry of immigrants into the Croatian labour market and their potential impact on the culture and values of Croatian society. Respondents answered using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). All seven items are listed in Table 4 in the Results section, while testing of scale validity on two subsamples is presented as one of the results based on the conducted factor analyses (see Table 5).

In addition, the acceptable level of closeness to foreign workers that respondents were willing to accept was measured using a modified social distance scale (Bogardus 1925; 1933). The original scale was initially modified by Bogardus himself (1933); in the present study, it was applied to foreign workers (among other immigrant groups). Students were asked to rate the closest relationship they would be willing to have with foreign workers using a seven-point scale: 1 – Marital relationship; 2 – Personal friend; 3 – Immediate neighbour; 4 – Colleague at work; 5 – Resident in my country; 6 – Visitor to my country; 7 – To exclude from my country. Scores on the scale were treated as cumulative, meaning that acceptance of a closer relationship also implied acceptance of all less close relationships.⁶ Although ordinal in nature, which constitutes a methodological limitation, the social distance scale was treated as a continuous interval variable in the hierarchical regression analysis for several reasons. The Bogardus scale and its variations are often treated as quasi-continuous in sociological (and psychological) research in Croatia (cf. Kumpes 2018) and elsewhere (Shi et al. 2024), since ordinal data may be treated as continuous without a significant loss of statistical power or the introduction of systematic error (Type I error) (Rhemtulla et al. 2012). Moreover, linear regression analysis is considered robust for such deviations when the distribution is normal and it includes enough categories (Norman 2010). The distribution parameters of the version of the social distance scale used in this study indicate that, in both survey cycles, it can be considered normally distributed,⁷ and therefore the seven-category version was retained.

The independent indicators analysed in relation to attitudes and social distance towards foreign workers included the socio-demographic

variables presented in the sample description, highest parental education level, attitudes towards religion (Marinović Jerolimov 2005), and political orientation. The final group of independent indicators concerned attitudinal constructs related to inclinations towards political concepts (Čulig et al. 2007).⁸ Certain deviations in the latent structure of this scale between the two survey cycles were identified. In 2019, the latent structure of the analysed political attitudes was almost identical to that found in the original study, and factors of nationalism (a combined nationalism and anti-multiculturalism factor), clericalism, expertocracy, and Europeanism were extracted (cf. Gregurović & Mrakovčić 2022). In 2024, the factor structure differed somewhat, resulting in factors of clericalism with support for nationalism, multiculturalism with opposition to nationalism, expertocracy, and Europeanism. Despite these deviations from the original measurement instrument, we believe that the latent dimensions obtained in both cycles can still be compared across years and meaningfully interpreted within the framework of the original concepts (see Mrakovčić et al. 2025).

The paper employed a series of univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analyses using SPSS 26.0. Univariate analyses first describe attitudes towards foreign workers, which are subsequently examined in relation to selected demographic characteristics of the respondents. Descriptive statistics for all indicators used, together with the correlation matrix, are presented separately for the subsamples from 2019 and 2024 in the Appendix. Differences in mean values between and within the two research cycles were analysed using a t-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA). While conducting mean comparison tests, homogeneity of variance was taken into account; specifically, Welch's t-test was used in cases where variances were not homogeneous; otherwise, standard Student's t-test was used. For ANOVA, the Scheffé *post hoc* test was employed in cases of homogeneous variances, while Tamhane's T2 test was used when variances were not homogeneous. In addition, Cohen's *d* was calculated to determine the effect size of the conducted t-tests.

Finally, the latent structure of the examined attitudes was assessed using factor analysis, and the extracted factors were used as predictors of social distance in a hierarchical multiple regression analysis, since the focus of the paper is to analyse the effects of threat perception on the expressed social distance. The demographic variables included in Model 1 represent control variables often confirmed in similar studies. The indicators of perception of foreign workers as an economic and cultural threat were included in Model 2 to examine their direct effects while controlling only for respondents' demographic characteristics.

Finally, based on conceptual considerations and previous research, Model 3 introduces indicators of political attitudes to examine whether they account for (i.e. reduce or reinforce) the effect of perceived threat on expressed social distance towards foreign workers.

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6. Results and Discussion

The frequency distributions and mean values of the items measuring perceptions of economic and cultural threat posed by foreign workers, presented in Table 4, indicate that in both survey cycles, law students largely agreed that foreign workers should adapt to the values of Croatian society if they wish to work in Croatia and that Croatian workers should be given preference over foreign workers. The mean values for the other items point to neutral assessments regarding the cultural and economic effects of the arrival of foreign workers. In addition, Table 4 shows that attitudes changed significantly between 2019 and 2024 and became more negative, except for the item stating that migrant workers would burden Croatia's already saturated labour market. The calculated effect sizes indicate small-to-moderate effects reflecting reliable changes between survey cycles. On average, respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement at either time point, and the observed mean values were close to the theoretical scale average. Respondents also expressed neutral attitudes regarding whether the government should allow the importation of foreign (migrant) labour; however, on average they were significantly less inclined to support this statement, and the distribution of responses indicates considerably lower support in 2024 (17.4%) than in 2019 (28.4%). It is possible that this perception was shaped and maintained by frequent media appearances of business representatives and politicians, who often emphasise that there is a chronic labour shortage in certain sectors and industries in Croatia. On the other hand, this distancing may also have been reinforced by media and social media narratives emphasising threats to employment, welfare systems, and cultural norms, often leading to the segregation and social exclusion of migrants (Laurence & Goebel 2024). As these media portrayals were not part of the empirical data analysed in this study, any interpretation of their effects remains speculative. Nevertheless, although respondents do not appear to believe that migrant workers place an additional burden on the Croatian labour market, the majority believe that, in cases of equal qualifications, employers should always give preference to domestic workers over foreign workers. In 2019, 63.1% of respondents supported this view, whereas in 2024 the

Table 4: Distributions of attitudes regarding the perception of foreign workers as an economic–cultural threat and t-test results

	Year	1	2	3	4	5	N	M	SD	T test	Cohen's d
Migrant workers should adapt to the values of Croatian society if they want to work in it.	2019	2.1%	4.3%	14%	37.4%	42.3%	672	4.13	0.952	t=-5.407 df=1257 p<0.000	0.305
	2024	1.2%	3.1%	9.7%	25.1%	60.5%	587	4.41	0.875		
Migrant workers would burden the already saturated labour market in Croatia.	2019	12.8%	19.5%	33.3%	21.1%	12.4%	666	3.01	1.195	t=0.168 df=1244 p<0.867	
	2024	9%	21.4%	40%	16.9%	11%	580	3.00	1.098		
Migrant workers will never adapt to the values of Croatian society.	2019	14.3%	26%	35.3%	15.8%	7.9%	667	2.77	1.124	t=-6.003 df=1246 p<0.000	0.336
	2024	8.3%	18.5%	35.8%	21.7%	14.2%	581	3.15	1.141		
If migrant and domestic workers have equal qualifications, preference should always be given to domestic workers.	2019	8%	7.3%	21.4%	22.6%	40.5%	671	3.80	1.265	t=-5.532 df=1256.85 p<0.000	0.317
	2024	3.9%	5.4%	15.6%	19.2%	55.6%	588	4.18	1.120		
There is a danger that migrant workers will destroy our culture and customs.	2019	19.5%	25.9%	30.4%	14%	10.3%	672	2.70	1.224	t=-9.123 df=1258 p<0.000	0.510
	2024	9.3%	16.9%	26.3%	25.4%	21.7%	588	3.33	1.250		
I would find it difficult to accept having a migrant worker as my boss at work.	2019	29.3%	19.3%	24.7%	12.8%	13.7%	671	2.62	1.380	t=-9.658 df=1257 p<0.000	0.548
	2024	13.2%	14.6%	23.7%	17.6%	30.5%	588	3.38	1.392		
The Croatian government should allow the import of foreign (migrant) labour.	2019	13.7%	20.1%	37.8%	20.7%	7.7%	672	2.89	1.120	t=4.676 df=1258 p<0.000	-0.263
	2024	19.8%	22.9%	39.5%	12.7%	4.7%	588	2.60	1.087		
1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree											

Source: Prepared by the authors.

percentage rose to 74.8%. A shift in respondents' perceptions was also observed regarding the (non-)acceptance of the possibility that a foreign worker could be their supervisor in the workplace. While in 2019 approximately every fourth respondent (26.5%) reported that they would have difficulty accepting this possibility, in 2024 this proportion increased to almost every second respondent (48.1%).

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When analysing perceptions related to the cultural diversity of foreign workers and their cultural adaptation, the results show that approximately eight out of ten respondents agree that foreign workers should adapt to the values of Croatian society. This view became even stronger in 2024. Although the share of respondents who agreed with this statement (response categories 4 and 5) increased by only 5.9% compared with 2019 (85.6% vs. 79.7%), the shift is particularly evident in the proportion of respondents who strongly agree (category 5): in 2024, 60.6% of respondents completely agreed, compared with 42.3% in 2019. At the same time, compared with 2019, the share of respondents in 2024 who believed that migrant workers posed a danger to Croatian culture and customs almost doubled (24.3% vs. 47.1%). We also observe an increase in respondents' perceptions regarding the (im)possibility of foreign workers adapting to the values of Croatian society. While in 2019 23.7% believed that foreign workers would never be able to adapt to the values of the host society, this proportion increased to 35.9% in 2024. Overall, the results indicate that most respondents believe foreign workers should adapt their habits and behaviour to the cultural values of Croatian society, that the perceived threat to Croatian culture and customs has increased, and that doubts regarding the ability of foreign workers to adapt have become more widespread. This set of attitudes is somewhat more pronounced than attitudes that frame foreign workers primarily as a source of socio-economic threat. In other words, law students perceive foreign workers as a cultural threat to a somewhat greater extent than as an economic threat. In addition, perceptions of foreign workers as a potential threat to Croatian society increased significantly in 2024 compared to 2019. Given that migrants are often "discursively constructed as threatening Others", they may be ideologically perceived as not fitting into the host community, which leads to the construction of migrants in opposition to normative socio-cultural characteristics of Croatian identity (Popović et al. 2022, 11). This suggests a certain degree of structural xenophobia in Croatian society (Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2024), which law students may also be inclined to adopt.

Next, factor analysis was conducted to examine the latent structure of perceptions of migrant workers as a socio-economic and socio-cultural threat in 2019 and 2024 (Table 5).⁹ The initial factor solution conducted on 7-item scale yielded two factors in the 2019 data and a single factor in the 2024 data. The strongest thematic divergence from other items and weaker saturation on single-factor solution was detected for the item “The Croatian government should allow the import of foreign (migrant) labour”, which was subsequently excluded from the model. After that, economic and cultural threat items formed a single latent factor in both datasets, enabling full comparison between the two cycles of study and explaining 47.425% of the instrument’s variance in 2019 and 48.503% in 2024. The exclusion also contributed to an increase in the overall scale reliability. In both cases, the resulting factor showed satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha_{2019} = 0.774$; Cronbach’s $\alpha_{2024} = 0.785$). In further regression analyses, the effects of the excluded item were examined separately by treating this item as an independent predictor. Compared with earlier research on attitudes towards foreign workers in Croatia, which found that about fifteen years ago socio-economic and socio-cultural threats posed by foreign workers were perceived by Croatian citizens as separate latent dimensions (Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2012, 321), our findings suggest that over the past five years these dimensions have been perceived by law students as a single, integrated economic-cultural threat. This is consistent with previous studies showing that, in specific cases (e.g., homogeneous settings characterised by high levels of national identification), perceived threat often does not assume differentiated forms but is instead integrated into a single dimension of negative attitudes towards the Other (see Esses et al. 2001). It is also consistent with the Integrated Threat Theory model (Stephan et al. 1999; Stephan & Stephan 2000). Students included in both research cycles demonstrated high levels of homogeneity in terms of national identification, which may lead them not to differentiate between diverse sources of threat and instead to base their opinion on a simplified us-versus-them narrative. Therefore, immigrants may simultaneously represent both real and symbolic threats: the former arise from perceived threats to personal and national security, economic power, and material well-being of society, whereas the latter are reflected in perceived threats to national identity and the cultural values of one’s own group in relation to the “threatening Other” (cf. Pereira et al. 2009; Mrakovčić & Gregurović 2020).

Table 5: Perception of foreign workers as an economic–cultural threat (factor analysis results)

	2019	2024
Variables	Factor loading	
Migrant workers should adapt to the values of our society if they want to work in it.	0.537	0.578
Migrant workers would burden the already saturated labour market in our country.	0.582	0.544
Migrant workers will never adapt to the values of our society.	0.742	0.740
If migrant and domestic workers have equal qualifications, preference should always be given to the domestic worker.	0.673	0.699
There is a danger that migrant workers will destroy our culture and customs.	0.818	0.801
I would find it difficult to accept a migrant worker as my boss at work.	0.739	0.776

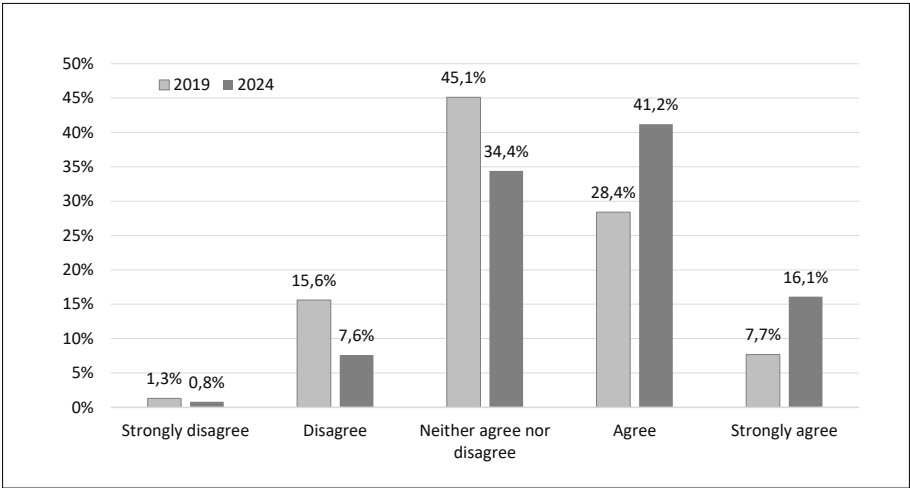
Source: Prepared by the authors.

However, in the model, the highest factor loadings are found for statements expressing emotionally charged cultural and hierarchical status-related claims, such as the belief that Croatian culture could be destroyed or that foreign workers are unable to adapt to the values of Croatian society, and an unwillingness to accept the possibility of having a migrant worker as their boss at work. At the same time, economic and normative considerations related to the possibility that foreign workers may (over)burden the labour market, the need for foreign workers to adapt to domestic values if they wish to work in Croatia, or the view that domestic workers should always be given priority in employment when equally qualified, show somewhat more moderate factor loadings. Therefore, the factor-loading values suggest that students are somewhat more inclined to perceive foreign workers through the lens of cultural incompatibility than through the prism of economic risks. For the purposes of further analysis, a composite variable measuring perceptions of foreign workers as an integrated economic–cultural threat was constructed (Figure 2).¹⁰

The distributions and t-test results presented in Figure 2 indicate that, in 2024 compared with 2019, there was a significant shift in perceptions of foreign workers as an economic–cultural threat. While in 2019 the majority of respondents (45.1%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements, in 2024 the largest share (41.2%) mostly agreed with them. This shift is also reflected in the fact that, in 2024 relative to 2019, the proportion of respondents who mostly or strongly agreed

increased by 21.2%, while the proportion of those who mostly or strongly disagreed was reduced by half (2019 – 16.9%; 2024 – 8.4%).

180 **Figure 2: Perception of foreign workers as an economic–cultural threat: descriptive statistics for the composite variable, 2019 and 2024**



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Below, we examine whether changes occurred between 2019 and 2024 in perceptions of foreign workers as an integrated threat with respect to selected socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (Table 6). The average attitudes of female and male students did not differ significantly in 2019; however, in 2024 male students perceived foreign workers as a threat to a statistically significantly greater extent than female students. This finding is supported by numerous previous studies (cf. Gregurović 2023; Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2024), although more recent research also points to changes in this pattern (Župarić-Iljić & Lalić 2024). We also observe changes associated with the city in which students study. While in 2019 students in Split and Osijek expressed, on average, statistically significantly more negative attitudes towards foreign workers than students in Zagreb and Rijeka, no statistically significant difference was found in 2024. A similar result emerges with regard to place of residence. Whereas in 2019 respondents from small and medium-sized towns and cities differed significantly in their average attitudes towards foreign workers compared with respondents from Zagreb, these differences were no longer statistically significant in 2024.

Table 6: Respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and perception of foreign workers as an economic–cultural threat (composite variable)

		2019		2024	
		N	M	N	M
Gender	Female	485	3.27	409	3.61
	Male	170	3.24	151	3.84
		$t=0.403$ (df=653) $p=0.687$		$t=-2.855$ (df=558) $p=0.004$	
Year of study	1st year	345	3.28	370	3.71
	4th year	315	3.23	203	3.57
		$t=0.727$ (df=658) $p=0.467$		$t=1.790$ (df=571) $p=0.074$	
Location of the Law Faculty	Zagreb	261	3.06	137	3.63
	Rijeka	191	3.24	171	3.59
	Split	113	3.52	144	3.82
	Osijek	95	3.55	121	3.61
		$F=12.131$ ($p=0.000$) 1,2 $\neq$ 3,4		$F=2.211$ ($p=0.86$)	
Parents' highest educational attainment	Primary school	11	3.18	3	3.33
	Secondary school	238	3.33	242	3.55
	College or higher	396	3.22	310	3.76
		$F=1.349$ ($p=0.260$)		$F=4.013$ ($p=0.017$) 2 $\neq$ 3	
Place of residence	Village	128	3.25	100	3.58
	Small town	171	3.31	207	3.63
	Large town	173	3.40	149	3.76
	Zagreb	151	3.05	70	3.67
		$F= 4.872$ ($p=0.002$) 2,3 $\neq$ 4		$F=1.003$ ($p=0.391$)	
Self-assessed family socio-economic status	Worse than the majority	13	3.54	14	3.21
	Neither better nor worse than the majority	322	3.29	259	3.61
	Better than the majority	306	3.22	279	3.72
		$F=1.244$ ($p=0.289$)		$F=2.956$ ($p=0.053$)	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

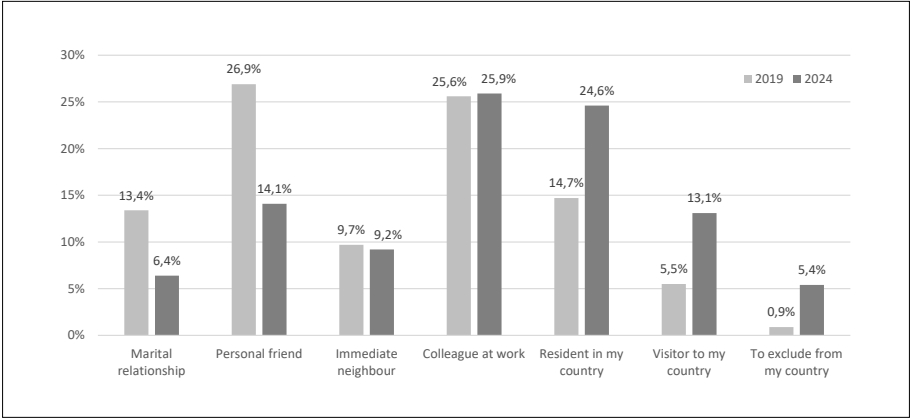
This result is not supported by recent research, which in the Croatian context continues to confirm a significant effect of settlement size on attitudes towards immigrants (see, e.g., Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2024). The opposite pattern is observed with regard to parents' highest educational attainment. While in 2019 there was no statistically significant difference in average attitude towards migrant workers, in 2024 respondents with at least one parent holding a college or university degree expressed more negative average attitudes than respondents with at least one parent who completed secondary school. Although one might expect the opposite (cf. Donnalaja & Borkowska 2025), this finding may indicate stronger support for anti-immigrant political discourse among the highly educated, which is transmitted to younger generations through family socialisation. By contrast, no statistically significant differences were found in either 2019 or 2024 with respect to respondents' year of study or their self-assessed family socio-economic status, although previous research has confirmed these associations (Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2024; Župarić-Iljić & Lalić 2024).

In addition to perceived threat theory, social distance theory (Park 1924; Bogardus 1925; 1933) is also important in research on this topic, as it measures the extent to which individuals are willing or unwilling to engage in close social relationships with members of an out-group who are of different ethnic origin or from different social or cultural backgrounds. The social distance scale has become a frequently used tool for analysing attitudes, prejudices, and preferred forms of contact with different social groups, especially those perceived as deviating from the dominant socio-cultural matrix or as threatening the social order. After examining changes in the perception of foreign workers in terms of integrated threat, we assessed whether social distance towards foreign workers had also changed. Considering that higher mean values indicate greater average social distance, the t-test results presented in Figure 3 show that in 2024 there was a statistically significant increase in social distance towards foreign workers compared with 2019. While in 2019 respondents were willing to accept foreign workers as next-door neighbours, in 2024 they were, on average, willing to accept them only as colleagues in the workplace. Social distancing from foreign workers is also evident in the fact that in 2024 the share of respondents who said they would be willing to marry a foreign worker (2019: 13.4%; 2024: 6.4%) or befriend one (2019: 29.9%; 2024: 14.1%) was approximately half that recorded in 2019. At the same time, in 2024 there was a marked increase in the proportion of respondents selecting categories indicating greater social distance from foreign workers. For example, the share of

those willing to accept foreign workers only as residents of their country rose from 14.7% to 24.6%, while the share of respondents willing to accept foreign workers only as visitors rose from 5.5% to 13.1%. Finally, the proportion of respondents who believed that foreign workers should be excluded from the country increased sixfold (2019: 0.9%; 2024: 5.4%). This increase in social distance towards foreign workers is consistent with increasingly negative attitudes and heightened perceptions of threat and is further corroborated by the results of regression analysis presented in the following section.

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Figure 3: Social distance towards foreign workers



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Table 7: Hierarchical regression analysis of predictors of social distance towards foreign workers, 2019 and 2024

	2019								
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Beta	p	VIF	Beta	p	VIF	Beta	p	VIF
Gender	-0.034	0.441	1.048	-0.05	0.225	1.051	-0.066	0.112	1.106
Place of residence	-0.039	0.401	1.145	-0.031	0.468	1.152	-0.042	0.331	1.183
Parents' highest educational attainment	-0.031	0.525	1.258	-0.028	0.541	1.264	-0.038	0.391	1.279
Self-assessed family socio-economic status	-0.005	0.914	1.149	0.038	0.379	1.165	0.026	0.548	1.174
Attitude towards religion	-0.243	0.000	1.029	-0.147	0.001	1.098	-0.058	0.239	1.578
Perception of foreign workers as an economic-cultural threat				0.320	0.000	1.260	0.209	0.000	1.780
Attitude that the government should allow the import of foreign (migrant) labour				-0.134	0.003	1.207	-0.136	0.002	1.234
Political orientation							0.055	0.258	1.513

Nationalism and anti-multiculturalism							0.161	0.001	1.640
Clericalism							0.132	0.009	1.658
Expertocracy							-0.08	0.046	1.037
Europeanism							0.076	0.056	1.023
	Adjusted R ² =0.060 F=7.264 (p<0.001)			Adjusted R ² =0.201 F=18.805 (p<0.001)			Adjusted R ² =0.238 F=13.856 (p<0.001)		
	2024								
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Beta	p	VIF	Beta	p	VIF	Beta	p	VIF
Parents' highest educational attainment	0.003	0.951	1.131	-0.035	0.443	1.138	-0.033	0.465	1.143
Self-assessed family socio-economic status	0.052	0.301	1.072	0.031	0.492	1.080	0.042	0.338	1.098
Attitude towards religion	-0.261	0.000	1.012	-0.164	0.000	1.069	-0.108	0.045	1.663
Perception of foreign workers as an economic-cultural threat				0.370	0.000	1.353	0.257	0.000	1.769
Attitude that the government should allow the import of foreign (migrant) labour				-0.165	0.001	1.368	-0.111	0.029	1.472
Political orientation							-0.009	0.862	1.533
Clericalism with support to nationalism							0.171	0.003	1.922
Multiculturalism with opposition to nationalism							-0.185	0.000	1.546
Expertocracy							0.012	0.781	1.031
Europeanism							-0.074	0.090	1.076
	Adjusted R ² =0.066 F=6.595 (p<0.001)			Adjusted R ² =0.275 F=22.570 (p<0.001)			Adjusted R ² =0.305 F=15.567 (p<0.001)		

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted by testing three models on data from both research cycles (Table 7) where social distance towards foreign workers – determined as indicator of potential behavioural intentions – was used as the dependent (criterion) variable. In the first model, respondents' basic socio-demographic characteristics were included as predictors; in the second model, attitudes towards foreign workers in the form of perceived economic and cultural threat were added; and in the third model, selected political attitudes were included. The results show that in 2019 religiosity was the only statistically significant predictor in the first model, which explained 6% of the variance of the dependent variable. More religious respondents, compared with non-religious respondents, expressed greater social distance towards foreign workers. In the second model, religiosity, perceptions of

foreign workers as an integrated economic and cultural threat, and attitudes towards whether the government should allow the import of foreign labour into Croatia emerged as statistically significant predictors, jointly explaining 20.1% of the variance in the criterion variable. Perceptions of foreign workers as an integrated economic and cultural threat had the strongest predictive power in this model. The more respondents perceived foreign workers as a threat, the greater their social distance towards them, and vice versa. Furthermore, a stronger belief that the government should not allow the import of foreign labour into Croatia was associated with greater social distance towards this group. Finally, in the third model, after introducing respondents' political attitudes, the explained variance in social distance towards foreign workers increased to 23.8%. The strongest individual predictor of the criterion variable remained the perception of foreign workers as an integrated threat, followed by attitudes endorsing nationalist and anti-multiculturalist values, clericalism, and opposition to the importation of foreign labour. Respondents who more strongly endorsed nationalist exclusivism and opposed multiculturalism, as well as those who more strongly believed that society should be organised according to the principles of the Church, expressed greater social distance towards foreign workers. In addition, respondents who more strongly supported the idea of expertocracy – whereby society should be organised according to scientific principles and governed by experts – demonstrated lower social distance towards foreign workers than those who opposed these ideas. However, it should be noted that this variable had the weakest predictive power in the model. Finally, political orientation and attitudes towards religion did not emerge as statistically significant predictors in the third model, despite relatively strong direct correlations with the criterion variable. Since political orientation was significantly correlated with attitudes towards religion ($r = -0.418$), nationalism and anti-multiculturalism ($r = 0.318$), and clericalism ($r = 0.439$), this result likely reflects a suppression effect. Accordingly, respondents with a right-wing political orientation, compared with those with a left-wing orientation, tended to express greater social distance towards foreign workers. A similar pattern applies to attitudes towards religion, which were significantly correlated with respondents' political orientation ($r = -0.418$) and clericalism ($r = -0.528$).

The results for 2024 are similar to those obtained in 2019, with the difference that the second and third models show slightly stronger predictive power. In the first model, religiosity again emerges as the only statistically significant predictor, explaining 6.6% of the variance in social

distance towards foreign workers. In the second model, perceptions of foreign workers as an economic and cultural threat, religiosity, and attitudes regarding whether the government should or should not allow the import of foreign labour emerged as statistically significant predictors, jointly explaining 27.5% of the variance in social distance towards foreign workers. Perceptions of foreign workers as an economic and cultural threat again represented the strongest predictor in this model. In the third model, perceptions of foreign workers as a threat remained the strongest predictor of social distance towards foreign workers. This was followed by multiculturalism combined with opposition to nationalism, and clericalism combined with support for nationalism.¹¹ Respondents who more strongly endorsed multiculturalism and opposed nationalism were more likely to support ethnic diversity and reported lower social distance. In contrast, those who more strongly endorsed clericalism and nationalism tended to favour ethnic homogeneity and reported greater social distance towards foreign workers (cf. Gijsberts et al. 2004). Similarly, more religious respondents and those who more strongly believe that the government should not allow the import of foreign workers into Croatia were more likely to report greater social distance towards this group than non-religious respondents and those who supported the import of foreign workers. This finding further confirms the importance of religiosity as a predictor of attitudes towards immigrants and immigration (cf. Scheepers et al. 2002). Again, respondents' political orientation did not emerge as a statistically significant predictor of social distance, despite showing a statistically significant direct correlation with the dependent variable ($r = 0.288$). Since this variable was also significantly correlated with religiosity ($r = -0.397$), clericalism combined with support for nationalism ($r = 0.412$), and multiculturalism combined with opposition to nationalism ($r = -0.266$), this finding likely reflects another suppression effect. In addition, since gender was not significantly correlated with the criterion variable and did not emerge as a statistically significant predictor in the first and second models, it is possible that its effect was likewise suppressed in the third model.¹²

Regression analyses across both cycles confirmed the findings from previous studies examining social distance towards ethnically and culturally different others. The effect of attitudes towards migrant workers on estimated social distance towards them was also confirmed by Čačić-Kumpes et al. (2012) in a study conducted in Croatia at a time when foreign workers were not present to any substantial extent. Greater social distance was expressed by respondents who perceived foreign workers

as a socio-economic threat, and even more strongly by those who perceived them as a socio-cultural threat. The effects of other attitudinal constructs on expressed social distance towards different ethnic and religious groups, including immigrants from different countries, were also confirmed in our study (see Mrakovčić et al. 2025). The findings show that respondents who support clericalism and nationalism, as well as those who oppose multiculturalism while supporting nationalism, express greater distance towards undesirable migrant groups, including immigrants from Africa and the Middle East, asylum seekers, and refugees, who are often associated with a Muslim background. More negative attitudes towards immigrants of the Islamic religion are more common among respondents with a right-wing political orientation and among sympathisers of right-wing political parties (Župarić-Iljić & Lalić 2024), which is frequently associated with political attitudes captured through the concepts of nationalism, anti-multiculturalism, and clericalism. Nationalism and religiosity have also emerged as significant predictors of Croatian citizens' attitudes towards immigrants and immigration in the most recent European Social Survey cycle (ESS 11; see Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2024). As the authors note, several studies conducted in Croatia have shown that respondents who consider themselves more religious express more negative attitudes towards immigrants (Vučković Juroš et al. 2014; Kumpes 2018; 2023; Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović 2020). Although this research suggests that the effects of nationalism and religiosity on attitudes towards immigrants are relatively weak, the authors warn that when these predictors are situated within a social context in which religion and nationalism are intertwined with politics, it becomes clearer why both tend to emerge as significant indicators of attitudes towards immigrants and immigration and signal the drawing of symbolic boundaries (Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2024, 245).

7. Implications and Conclusion

The results of the replicated study conducted over a five-year period (2019–2024) indicate patterns of change in law students' attitudes similar to those observed in the general Croatian population (cf. Župarić-Iljić & Lalić 2024). Despite the limitations of the research, which can be attributed to the instruments used (Mather et al. 2017), sampling, cross-sectional nature of data which prevents determining of causality and the reduced generalisability of the findings, the results nevertheless indicate an increase in negative attitudes towards a specific category of migrants – foreign workers in Croatia. This research also shows a stronger

perception of the target immigrant group as a cultural and symbolic rather than an economic threat (Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2024); however, at the latent level, these attitudes combine into a single integrated economic–cultural dimension. These attitudes were confirmed as the strongest predictors of social distance towards foreign workers, which also increased significantly during the analysed period. In 2019, law students were, on average, willing to establish a relationship of immediate neighbours with foreign workers, and in 2024, the distance increased further, on average by an entire category. In 2024, respondents were, on average, willing to accept foreign workers only as colleagues in the workplace. The greatest increase in social distance was recorded in the category of friendship, and according to Contact Theory (Allport 1954), friendship constitutes one of the desirable prerequisites for reducing prejudice. Crawley (2005) emphasises the distinction between “true acquaintance” or friendship and superficial encounters on the street, which can reinforce prejudice due to the lack of meaningful and effective interaction or mutual understanding. On the other hand, the results obtained may indicate a lack of “positive conditions” for achieving successful contact, which, among other things, also relate to perceived differences in status (Pettigrew & Tropp 2005; Pettigrew et al. 2011). Considering that foreign workers in Croatia are mostly employed in low-skilled jobs, with frequent experiences of employment below the level of their qualifications (occupational degradation) and skills mismatch, students may perceive status differences between their own position (as highly educated future professionals) and that of foreign workers, who are most often encountered in delivery services, construction, and other low-skilled occupations. Similar findings have also been reported regarding perceptions of threat. Cadinu and Reggiori (2002) show that the perception of group threat lead to stronger devaluation of low-status individuals than of high-status out-group members (cf. Riek et al. 2006).

Finally, it is important to note that the (future) legal professionals are a particularly significant group for research on this issue, especially considering the challenges related to the legal status and position of foreign workers regulated through residence and work permits in Croatia. Namely, the Aliens Act (Zakon o strancima 2020), which serves as the basis for regulating this status and the rights arising from it, is continuously changing. Since its adoption in 2020, the Act has been amended and supplemented three times. The last amendment was adopted in March 2025, and a new amendment has been announced and submitted for adoption. Continuous changes in the regulation of the rights

and obligations of foreigners, particularly third-country nationals who are mostly issued work permits, leave room for ambiguities and misinterpretations, especially among foreigners who do not speak Croatian. Therefore, being informed about and aware of the challenges faced by foreign workers in Croatia is one of the prerequisites for their successful integration and for ensuring that they will be treated in accordance with the law and that their rights are respected. Although previous studies have shown that shifts in students' attitudes may be facilitated (c.f. Ivandić et al. 2026), law students currently seem more inclined to adopt mainstream attitudes towards foreign workers, which indicate a greater reluctance to accept and establish contact with immigrants. As future legal professionals, their views on this issue should be grounded in the values and normative foundations of international and national conventions and legislative frameworks that regulate the rights and obligations of this group of migrants in Western democracies.

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Notes

- ¹ In this text, we use the terms migrant workers and foreign workers as synonyms referring to economic migrants, i.e. immigrants in Croatia registered under work and residence permits, as well as citizens of EU countries employed under the same conditions as Croatian citizens. The use of these terms may be justified by the use of similar terminology in both the public sphere and official institutions. For example, the Ministry of the Interior uses the terms aliens (in Croatian: *strani državljani*) and third-country nationals; the Croatian Bureau of Statistics and Eurostat report on number of immigrants regardless of their purpose of immigration; while the Ombudsman reports on violations of foreign workers' rights. Terms migrants, immigrants, and foreigners refer to broader categories of citizens of countries other than Croatia, regardless of their purpose of arrival. In the description of the theoretical and conceptual framework, the original terminology of referenced authors has been retained.
- ² For a more detailed discussion of the evolution of the concept of social distance and its operationalisation and application, see Ethington 1997, Pehlić 2019, and Gregurović & Mrakovčić 2022.
- ³ For the initial study, see Mrakovčić & Gregurović 2020 and Gregurović & Mrakovčić 2022.

- ⁴ It should be noted that in 2019 only 1.6% of respondents identified as members of other ethnic groups, while 5.2% of respondents did not report their ethnic affiliation. In 2024, 3.2% of respondents identified as members of other ethnic groups, and 6.9% of respondents did not answer this question.
- ⁵ Students were offered a scale ranging from 1 (significantly worse than majority) to 5 (significantly better than majority) to assess their family’s financial situation.
- ⁶ For issues relating to the construction and limitations of the social distance scale, see Ethington 1997, Pehlić 2019, and Mather et al. 2017.
- ⁷ The distribution normality indicators for the social distance scale in 2019 are: skewness = 0.191 and kurtosis = –0.970; for 2024: skewness = –0.251 and kurtosis = –0.662.
- ⁸ Example items included in this scale (translated into English) are: “If I know someone’s nationality, I know what kind of person he/she is”; “The Catholic Church should have its representatives in Parliament”; “The state should be organised according to scientific principles” (Čulig et al. 2007, 103–104).
- ⁹ Factor analysis was conducted for the 2019 and 2024 samples using the principal components method and the Kaiser-Guttman criterion to determine the number of factors to extract. In both cases, the assumptions for conducting factor analysis were met: 2019 Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy = 0.826; Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity = 1127.426 ($p < 0.001$); 2024 Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy = 0.826; Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity = 1127.426 ($p < 0.001$).
- ¹⁰ The composite variable was obtained by summing respondents’ scores on all variables included in the factor analysis, dividing the total by the total number of variables and rounding the results to whole numbers.
- ¹¹ It should be noted that the latent dimensions of the analysed political attitudes derived from factor analysis in 2019 and 2024 differ to some extent, as indicated in the methodology section.
- ¹² This is also supported by the fact that the gender variable is statistically significantly associated with some predictor variables in the third model, namely political orientation ($r = 0.155$), clericalism combined with support for nationalism ($r = 0.089$), and multiculturalism combined with opposition to nationalism ($r = -0.105$).

Appendix

Descriptives of indicators used in analyses – 2019 subsample

2019	N		Mean	Std. De- viation	Mini- mum	Maxi- mum
	Valid	Missing				
Gender	667	5	1.259	0.439	1	2
Place of residence	634	38	2.554	1.066	1	4
Parents’ highest education- al attainment	656	16	3.998	1.065	1	5

Self-assessed family socio-economic status	652	20	3.535	0.692	1	5
Attitude towards religion	650	22	2.632	1.440	1	6
Perception of foreign workers as an economic–cultural threat – composite scale	660	12	3.261	0.867	1	5
Belief that the government should allow the import of foreign (migrant) labour	672	0	2.887	1.120	1	5
Social distance towards foreign workers	650	22	3.222	1.523	1	7
Political orientation	575	97	3.14	1.094	1	5
Nationalism and anti-multi-culturalism – factor score	647	25	0.000	1.000	-2.164	3.514
Clericalism – factor score	647	25	0.000	1.000	-1.900	3.339
Expertocracy – factor score	647	25	0.000	1.000	-2.436	2.399
Europeanism – factor score	647	25	0.000	1.000	-2.337	3.328

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Descriptives of indicators used in analyses – 2024 subsample

2024	N		Mean	Std. De- viation	Mini- mum	Maxi- mum
	Valid	Missing				
Gender	575	15	1.266	0.442	1	2
Place of residence	540	50	2.361	0.944	1	4
Parents’ highest education- al attainment	570	20	3.951	1.087	1	5
Self-assessed family socio- -economic status	566	24	3.578	0.702	1	5
Attitude towards religion	557	33	2.364	1.372	1	6
Perception of foreign work- ers as an economic–cultural threat – composite scale	573	17	3.660	0.876	1	5
Belief that the government should allow the import of foreign (migrant) labour	588	2	2.595	1.087	1	5
Social distance towards foreign workers	490	100	3.13	1.157	1	5
Political orientation	582	8	4.105	1.587	1.000	7.000
Nationalism and anti-multi- culturalism – factor score	553	37	0.000	1.000	-1.936	2.533

Clericalism – factor score	553	37	0.000	1.000	-3.306	2.397
Expertocracy – factor score	553	37	0.000	1.000	-2.368	2.810
Europeanism – factor score	553	37	0.000	1.000	-2.226	3.468

Source: Prepared by the authors.

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Correlation matrix of indicators used in analyses – 2019 subsample

2019	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. Social distance towards foreign workers	.388***	-.246**	-.085*	-.091*	-.085*	-.016	-.251**	.239**	.315**	.236**	-.092*	.040
2. Perception of foreign workers as an economic-cultural threat	1	-.404**	-.016	-.065	-.055	-.030	-.244**	.327**	.533**	.221**	.034	-.055
3. Belief that the government should allow the import of foreign (migrant) labour		1	.055	.037	.091*	.086*	.118**	-.174**	-.269**	-.037	.051	.109**
4. Gender			1	.131**	.150**	.127**	.104**	.052	.118**	-.018	.105**	.004
5. Place of residence				1	.329**	.182**	.043	.072	-.073	.055	-.068	.008
6. Parents' highest educational attainment					1	.348**	.067	.101*	-.030	.041	-.012	-.023
7. Self-assessed family socio-economic status						1	-.017	.075	.052	.068	.003	-.004
8. Attitude towards religion							1	-.418**	-.116**	-.528**	.099*	.061
9. Political orientation								1	.318**	.439**	-.014	-.061
10. Nationalism and anti-multiculturalism – factor score									1	.000	.000	.000
11. Clericalism – factor score										1	.000	.000
12. Expertocracy – factor score											1	.000
13. Europeanism – factor score												1

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Correlation matrix of indicators used in analyses – 2024 subsample

2024	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. Social distance towards foreign workers	.426**	-.374**	-.025	-.009	-.011	.100*	-.258**	.280**	.327**	-.300**	-.032	-.034
2. Perception of foreign workers as an economic-cultural threat	1	-.423**	.120**	.056	.106*	.090*	-.180**	.369**	.373**	-.457**	.007	-.018
3. Belief that the government should allow the import of foreign (migrant) labour		1	.057	-.027	-.005	-.050	.191**	-.295**	-.281**	.354**	.048	.038
4. Gender			1	.124**	.145**	.072	.007	.155**	.089*	-.105*	.069	-.042
5. Place of residence				1	.288**	.157**	.007	.096*	-.041	-.069	.057	-.126**
6. Parents' highest educational attainment					1	.278**	.059	.045	.016	-.085**	.064	.027
7. Self-assessed family socio-economic status						1	-.058	.097*	.053	-.076	.043	.071
8. Attitude towards religion							1	-.397**	-.548**	-.007	.080	-.065
9. Political orientation								1	.412**	-.266**	-.072	-.131**
10. Clericalism with support to nationalism – factor score									1	.000	.000	.000
11. Multiculturalism with opposition to nationalism – factor score										1	.000	.000
12. Expertocracy – factor score											1	.000
13. Europeanism – factor score												1

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Percepcija grožnje in socialna distanca do tujih delavcev na Hrvaškem: sprememba v stališčih študentov prava v obdobju 2019–2024

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Povzetek

Za novejšje migracijske trende na Hrvaškem sta značilna pozitivna neto migracija ter vse bolj negativno dojemanje tujcev. Namen prispevka je preučiti stališča študentov prava do tujih delavcev kot ekonomske in kulturne grožnje, spremembe teh stališč v petletnem obdobju, njihove ključne determinante ter povezave s socialno distanco do tujih delavcev. Analizirani podatki so del širše raziskave o stališčih študentov štirih hrvaških pravnih fakultet (Zagreb, Reka, Split in Osijek) do različnih skupin migrantov, izvedene leta 2019 in ponovljene leta 2024. Analize v tem članku se osredotočajo posebej na stališča do tujih delavcev kot ene izmed obravnavanih skupin migrantov. Za preučitev dojemanja tujih delavcev kot ekonomske in kulturne grožnje ter opredelitev razlik med obema raziskavama je bila uporabljena vrsta bivariatnih in multivariatnih statističnih postopkov. S hierarhično regresijsko analizo so bili preverjeni učinki zaznane grožnje na socialno distanco do tujih delavcev ob upoštevanju demografskih značilnosti anketirancev in političnih stališč študentov. Rezultati kažejo, da so tuji delavci na Hrvaškem zaznani predvsem kot kulturna in simbolna, manj pa kot dejanska ekonomska grožnja, vendar se na latentni ravni ta stališča združujejo v enotno ekonomsko-kulturno dimenzijo. Omenjena stališča so se izkazala kot najmočnejši napovedniki socialne distance do tujih delavcev, ki se je v analiziranem obdobju pomembno povečala. Medtem ko so bili študenti prava leta 2019 pripravljeni sprejeti tuje delavce za sosede, so jih bili leta 2024 v povprečju pripravljeni sprejeti le še za sodelavce na delovnem mestu. Regresijska analiza je potrdila tudi statistično značilen vpliv političnih stališč anketirancev na izraženo socialno distanco, saj študenti, ki izraziteje podpirajo klerikalizem in nacionalizem ter nasprotujejo multikulturalizmu, izražajo večjo socialno distanco do tujih delavcev.

Ključne besede

tuji delavci (migranti), sprememba stališč, percepcija grožnje, socialna distanca, študenti prava, Hrvaška